New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

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1953 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres in Other Years

Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumns

1952 Vol.

Stage Play	*Page*
*Bernardine	231
*Children's Hour (The)	151
*Deep Blue Sea (The)	207
*Dial M for Murder	215
*Evening with Beatrice Lillie (An)	254
*Male Animal (The)	297
Mrs. McThing	359
My Darlin' Aida	218
*New Faces of 1952	278
*Pal Joey	398
*Seven Year Itch (The)	186
*Time of the Cuckoo (The)	235
*Time Out for Ginger	177
*Two's Company	157
Whistler's Grandmother	160
*Wish You Were Here	266

1951 Vol.

*Fourposter (The)	190
*King and I (The)	304
*Moon Is Blue (The)	322

1950 Vol.

*Guys and Dolls	185

1949 Vol.

*South Pacific	312

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of January 19, 1953*

1953 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres During 1953

Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	*Page*
Be Your Age	397
*Love of Four Colonels (The)	394

Theatre Openings

"The Love of Four Colonels"
"Be Your Age"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of January 19, 1953*

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Love of Four Colonels"

Journal American

January 16, 1953

A Crazy Fantasy Played With Taste

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE Theatre Guild, plus Aldrich and Myers, delivered to the Shubert Theatre last night a mad and merry romp called "The Love of Four Colonels," by Peter Ustinov, featuring the services of Rex Harrison, Lilli Palmer, Leueen MacGrath and a highly competent cast of fellow operatives.

This is a crazy and irregular fantasy, going nowhere in particular, but written and performed with such taste and intelligence that nobody cares. It is a delightful evening in the theatre.

Ustinov, whose effort has been rewarded with a long run in London, has chosen to tell the story of four colonels who are thrown together in occupation duty in Germany — an American, an Englishman, a Frenchman and a Russian.

Vest-Pocket UN

Here he has created a vest-pocket edition of the United Nations Assembly, four reasonable guys trying to get along within the limits of their divergent ideologies.

The Russian is steeped in his Marxian theories, with a ready answer for every question; the Englishman maintains his traditional love of dignity; the Frenchman views everything through a fast and jaundiced eye, and the American is placid and practical, perhaps a bit too concerned with the obvious apothegms of pills and psychiatry.

Whimsy enters the proceedings when Rex Harrison arrives in the guise of the evil fairy. He is taking the four colonels to the magic castle near their billet where a beauty (Lilli Palmer) has been asleep for a hundred years.

If one of them is able to seduce her, she will come to life, and in the ensuing charades which occupy most of the second half of the program we see the four colonels enacting their secret selves pitted against this unattainable dish.

The Frenchman becomes a gallant in the French Renaissance; the Briton a knight in the 16th century; the Russian an officer in the realm of the late Czar, and the American a modern missionary, the Saroyanesque founder of "Girlstown," who is bent upon reforming a tart.

Little Logic

There is little logic in all these wild burlesques; there is no conclusion to be reached from the decision of the American and the Frenchman to remain asleep with the beauty for the next century.

I think Ustinov has merely drawn a muddled and mainly hilarious caricature of the individual who could become a colonel in the four countries represented.

He has made a fair estimate of their approach to love—not as national emissaries, but as individuals. And he has provided a lot of laughs.

Harrison, who also directed, has established himself once again as one of our best actors and theatrical technicians. And Miss Palmer has a field day with her wild characterizations in the vignettes.

Leueen MacGrath is a lovely and capable good fairy and Robert Coote, Larry Gates, George Voskovec and Stefan Schnabel are absolutely immaculate as the four colonels.

The settings and costumes by Rolf Gerard are imaginative and in great good taste. I will defy anybody to tell me what "Four Colonels" is all about—but I don't think it matters.

"THE LOVE OF FOUR COLONELS"

Comedy by Peter Ustinov; staged by Rex Harrison; scenery and costumes by Rolf Gerard; presented by the Theatre Guild and Aldrich and Myers at the Sam S. Shubert Theatre, January 15, 1953. The cast:

Col. Wesley Breitenspiegel.... Larry Gates
Col. Desmond de S. Rinder-Sparrow Robert Coote
Col. Aime Frappot..... George Voskovec
Col. Alexander Ikonenko..... Stefan Schnabel
Mayor of Herzogenberg..... Reginald Mason
The Man..... Rex Harrison
Donovan..... Leueen MacGrath
Beauty..... Lilli Palmer

New York Post

January 16, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

Peter Ustinov's Unusual Comedy

Freshness, imagination and gay intellectual prankishness are so rare in the current theater that I hope Peter Ustinov's "The Love of Four Colonels," which opened last night at the Shubert, will receive some of the appreciation in New York that London has been bestowing upon it for the last couple of seasons. Although Mr. Ustinov does handicap his fantasy by the sheer perverseness of his humor and it does have a tendency to run down as it goes along, there is so much that is wise, witty and downright brilliant in his antic creativeness that I think his play is one of the few bright events of a stodgy theatrical year.

It is given a good head start toward success by the sparkling presence in the cast of the popular Harrisons in a dozen or so of its leading roles. Rex Harrison is playing a debonair agent of the Devil and Miss Palmer is Ideal Beauty, but in the course of Mr. Ustinov's manipulations, they double as all sorts of odd and fascinating creations, and they are always the life of the party. If Mr. Harrison lacks some of the comic deviltry that the author brought to his acting of the Evil Fairy in London, he is nonetheless sardonically impressive, while Miss Palmer, who certainly looks the part, is a sheer delight as Beauty in many incarnations.

Love and Politics

"The Love of Four Colonels" starts out as if it were to be a witty political satire, and its opening scene of the post-war meeting of the Army representatives of the United States, Britain, France and Russia in a disputed zone in Germany is the most brilliant part of a frequently brilliant play. But the author is not chiefly interested in politics. He is mainly concerned with national attitudes toward sex, beauty and life, and he sets his colonels to wooing the Sleeping Beauty back to life in the fashion of their various national playwrights, with the Evil Fairy egging them on and the Good Fairy interfering.

No one can accuse Mr. Ustinov of writing a tidy or single-minded play, and, above all, he is preoccupied with his own intellectual prankishness, no matter where it may roam. Thereupon, the first thing you know he is off on his parodies of historic styles in the drama. His French colonel pursues the girl in the fashion of eighteenth century farce, his Briton goes in for Elizabethan drama, the Russian turns to Chekhov, and the American becomes a fighting parson in a gangster movie. All of the parodies have their points, but the one on Chekhov is especially fine and the American movie scene is least impressive.

The Pursuit

At the end, the author's inventiveness deserts him a bit, and the close is rather a let-down, but Mr. Ustinov can be provocative even when his muse is running thin. He lets two of the national representatives decide to continue their pursuit of ideal beauty in a century's time and the other two return to the world of reality, and I think you may be interested to see how the sides divide over the question. I suspect "The Love of Four Colonels" is better in parts than as a whole, because the author is chiefly interested in letting his comic imagination range at will, but he rarely ceases to be stimulating.

The play is admirably served in both the playing and the physical production. Miss Palmer is a joy throughout, and I suppose she is especially remarkable as the lady gangster of the American's dream. I don't quite know why Mr. Harrison should make the gangster in this episode resemble Jimmy Durante, but he is immensely effective in all of the Evil Fairy's incarnations. Leueen MacGrath is excellent as the Good Fairy, and there can only be admiration for Larry Gates as the American, Robert Coote as the Englishman, George Voskovec as the Frenchman and Stefan Schnabel as the Russian. Mr. Ustinov's play has refreshing originality.

The New York Times

January 16, 1953

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Being an actor, Peter Ustinov knows how to write for actors. And this is the principal virtue of "The Love of Four Colonels," which opened at the Shubert last evening. Lilli Palmer and Rex Harrison give excellent performances in Mr. Ustinov's intellectual charade. So do all the actors. For make-believe becomes them, and nearly every actor has his chance, not only to act a character, but to mimic it in an impish play within a play.

As a writer Mr. Ustinov is exhilarating when he is witty and tiresome when he is facetious. "The Love of Four Colonels" begins with a promising scene showing a meeting of the Allied Military Administration in Germany. Note that the four colonels are American, British, French and Russian, engaged in the frustrating business of trying to reach almost any agreement.

* * *

Since Mr. Ustinov has a Shavian gift for satire, the conversation between the colonels is not only funny but refreshing. He is not waving any banners nor defending any cause. He is ribbing four national characters, and this is something we can afford to take in big doses.

But Mr. Ustinov prefers to go off into an elaborate allegory about a good fairy and an evil fairy competing for the control of Sleeping Beauty's destiny. Choosing their favorite period in their national history, the four colonels in succession make love to Sleeping Beauty with the most dishonorable intentions.

Mr. Ustinov is carried away with his own brilliance in these charades. What they reveal about national character may be enormously profound if you are willing to sit down in a quiet corner and say: "Now, let me see. He represents, etc., etc." But the device of the four plays within a play effectively blocks any movement there may be in "The Love of Four Colonels." They repeat one superficial idea four times. Since the main play never resumes, they constitute a continuous interruption.

Let's be grateful for the little flourishes of acting they stimulate. They permit Miss Palmer not only to be entrancing, which is one of the easiest things she does, but to burlesque French, English, Russian and American characters in amusing periods of time. She does each one of them brilliantly; the impersonations are light, joyous, and broadly mischievous. As the evil spirit, Mr. Harrison has a part that includes comparable masquerades. He, too, is dexterous and expert, mocking and witty.

Cast as the good fairy, Leueen MacGrath unfortunately has a more monotonous part to play, for you know what the curse of goodness is. But she gives a sharp and lucid performance inside the limits of propriety that Mr. Ustinov has set for her. The four colonels are luckier: they can kick up their heels in the second act and give as well as have a good time. Larry Gates as a childlishly enthusiastic American, Robert Coote as an ingrown though amiable Britisher, George Voskovec as an ebullient Frenchman and Stefan Schnabel as a ponderous Russian—all give capital performances. Reginald Mason plays a subordinate part with his usual neatness and good-humor.

* * *

Mr. Harrison has directed the performance in an agreeable vein of improvisation. Faced with the problem of combining a realistic premise with a fantastic conclusion, Rolf Gerard has designed scenery that is pretty literal. Mr. Ustinov may, in fact, have required the impossible. For his comedy has a gay style and a penetrating wit. But it is also random and general and perhaps a little precocious, as though Mr. Ustinov regretted his intellectual maturity.

DAILY NEWS

January 16, 1953

'Four Colonels' Very Whimsical

JOHN CHAPMAN

"The Love of Four Colonels," which opened last evening at the Sam S. Shubert Theatre, has an even chance of being the most aggressively whimsical piece of literature since "Peter Rabbit." And considerably less exciting, even though there is a handsome setting by Rolf Gerard and the handsome and graceful presence of Rex Harrison and Lilli Palmer in what appear to be the leading roles.

This play, a London hit, is by Peter Ustinov. With fearfully deliberate whimsy, it tells how four modern colonels — an American who looks like Eisenhower, a Frenchman who looks like de Gaulle, an Englishman who looks like an Englishman and a Russian who looks like Stalin — would awaken and try to conquer the Sleeping Beauty of legend. Harrison, playing the stage manager of this charade, offers each of the four his choice of the period, place and mood he considers most advantageous for the despoliation of the Sleeping Beauty, who is played by Miss Palmer in four wigs.

Four Bids, No Takers.

The Russian chooses the period of Chekhov and "The Cherry Orchard." He sits in a swing and knits while she plays croquet. The Englishman fancies himself an Arthurian knight and the girl a lily maid. The Frenchman, ever practical, wants to make his passes in the elegant style of, say, Moliere. And the American thinks the best approach would be to be a Reverend Davidson who somehow gets himself mixed up in a performance of Saroyan's "The Time of Your Life." None wins.

All of this is, of course, portentous and allegorical as all hell. The play begins with the four colonels bickering about procedure in a sector of occupied Germany. Harrison, a suave gent from hell or some place, transports them to an enchanted castle where the Sleeping Beauty dozes. Assisting in this transportation is what appears to be a neatly uniformed WAC in the agreeable shape of Leueen MacGrath.

Harrison is charming in an assortment of disguises and putty noses. All of Miss Palmer's wigs look as though they were her own hair. Most successful of the performers, to me, is Stefan Schnabel as the Stalin character. The Theatre Guild and Aldrich & Myers have combined managerial forces and talents to offer this production, and it has been directed with excessive elegance by Harrison.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 16, 1953

'Love of 4 Colonels' Witty and Unusual

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Love of Four Colonels" is a flamboyant joke, rather like a revue that is spoken instead of sung. It is often witty, penetrating and wry and it is always unusual. It takes your imagination for a wild ride on an innerspring roller coaster. It opened at the Shubert last night.

Naturally, too, it has the meandering nature of a revue, and sounds as if the author had started writing without a positive idea of where he would end. In sum, though, Peter Ustinov has rung multiple changes of fantasy on his conceit of playing the legend of Sleeping Beauty in a disputed area under a four-power government.

The Beauty is every man's ideal. She is awakened, and the forces of Good and Evil vie with each other in the matter of whether she will be seduced by each of the colonels—American, English, French and Russian. To glamorize the jape, each man can woo the lady in any form he chooses.

And All Fail.

Chronologically, they pursue her—the Frenchman in a satire of Moliere, the Englishman in a roundabout parody of Shakespeare's historical tragedies, the Russian after Checkhov and the American in a dizzy cinematic melo of the "Rain" school.

In the end, since all fail, each has the chance to sleep for a century and try again or go home.

This is recounted with a prodigious quantity of revealing fun in the contrasting national natures. The Englishman is a little slow and correct, the Russian practical and earthy, the Frenchman reasonable and charming, and the Yank a hearty soul.

A Lunish Voice.

The part of the Wicked Fairy

"The Love of Four Colonels"—*continued*

becomes a master of ceremonies, devising the plan, making the rules, then fighting for Wrong. It is delightfully played by Rex Harrison, mercurial and effete, with a light and Luntish voice.

His four different characters in the tourneys with the beauty's virtue are wittily conceived and played with bright pace.

Lilli Palmer as the beauty has a demanding assignment with the four ideals of the colonels. As so often happens in revues, the joke each time is quickly tipped, and the writing to support it is not overly rich. Visually festive throughout, Miss Palmer is at her best as the deadpan British maiden, and only really rocky when her red-haired Yankee barfly lapses into cockney. She is elegant and bawdy at once, which is the invaluable quality for the roles.

Leueen MacGrath is the Good Fairy, and likewise yummy on the eyes. She is the zinger, the payoff, in each sketch, and must be noble outside them, but disports an alluring uniform for that.

Daily Mirror

January 16, 1953

'Love of Four Colonels' A Diverting Frolic

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The Theatre Guild and Aldrich & Myers last evening brought theatre back to a theatre that sadly needs it, when they presented Peter Ustinov's "The Love of Four Colonels" at the Shubert. The comedy has been running for several seasons in London, with the author starred.

* * *

THE NEW ARRIVAL is based on the Sleeping Beauty legend, which has served as the springboard for English pantomimes and ballets over the years. It is really "panto" with modern and Miltonic overtones. It is, on the whole, a wonderfully diverting frolic.

The action starts in the Allied Military Administration Office in a German town after World War II. Here, four Colonels, representing the U. S., Britain, France and Russia, are puzzled by their inability to obtain access to a mysterious castle. Up pops an ageless character, who is a devil and a bad fairy.

He promises to lead them to their goal, just as another ageless character—an angel and a good fairy arrives on the scene to counter his trickery with magic of her own. Under their guidance, the officers reach the castle ballroom where, on a court theatre stage, Sleeping Beauty lies waiting to be re-awakened by the kiss of the right suitor.

THE OFFICERS are each given the chance to woo the beauty. As they do so, their national characteristics and romantic philosophies are revealed. If you want to know what happens to them in these delightfully satiric episodes, you will have to visit the Shubert.

Rex Harrison is suavely effective as the cynical magician, while Leueen MacGrath is most eloquent on the side of the angels. Lilli Palmer is at her charming best as the Beauty.

Larry Gates, Robert Coote, George Voskovec and Stefan Schnabel are eminently right as the four perplexed colonels. And Reginald Mason, too long absent from Broadway, makes a too brief appearance as the town's mayor.

* * *

THE VERSATILE Harrison has also directed the American version of the Ustinov fun-fest. He has condensed the original three acts into two, and eliminated several characters to fit the play to his and Miss Palmer's ingratiating talents. Rolf Gerard has designed a production that handsomely catches the present-day practical and story-book past.

"The Love of Four Colonels" may well prove to be the most controversial play of the season. It will be embraced affectionately by some and dismissed lightly by others. As one famous first-nighter put it: "It's great carriage-trade hokum."

We found it almost constantly amusing and rewarding. We thought it missed its point sometimes, though, when it went metaphysical. It has imagination, wit, illusion and beauty, qualities which we get too seldom from a pedestrian stage. It is a welcome antidote for drab realism and formula dramatics.

* * *

DON'T LOOK for weighty implications, which probably aren't there; take it as a sprightly lark, and we think you will have fun. We certainly did. What a pleasure it was to escape into a world of fantasy and humor. To be enjoying theatre again.

Winchell says:

Luscious Lilli
And sexy Rex
Spoofing the hell out of
Sex! Sex! Sex!

New York Herald Tribune

January 16, 1953

'The Love of Four Colonels'

By WALTER F. KERR

IN "The Love of Four Colonels," which the Theater Guild and Aldrich and Myers brought to the Shubert Thursday, author Peter Ustinov is taking a look at politics, idealism and worldly romance with the prankish impudence of a precocious schoolboy.

He has invaded the conference rooms of a four-power zone in Germany and engaged the American, British, French and Russian administrators in some antically irreverent and highly amusing battles of protocol. He has had the Devil drop in on them—swathed in a black cloak, flourishing walking stick, and sporting a tell tale red muffler—to suggest that they accompany him to a near-by, long-deserted castle.

He has whisked the whole outfit, with a determined female Angel in hot pursuit, to the castle—where, it turns out, Sleeping Beauty lies in languid invitation on a vast, rose-hued, story-book bed.

* * *

Each of our national types sees her as his own particular ideal—the Frenchman as an eighteenth-century lass of the boulevards, the Russian as a flaxen-haired figure out of Chekhov, the Englishman as something virginally Elizabethan, the American as a moll in an all-night dive—and each gets his chance to waken and to claim her. Each fails, surrendering the illusion he has long cherished, though the American and the Frenchman decide to stick around for another hundred years and take one more crack at making their dreams come true.

This light-hearted, random, and often quite puzzling improvisation has both the virtues and the defects of precocity. It has the free fancy of an unclogged and not yet conventionalized imagination; it has a good-natured contempt for sobriety; it has a theatrical enthusiasm for masks, wigs, outrageous whiskers, and Pinocchio-like putty noses. It has an uncontrollable urge to give everybody in sight a vigorous dig in the shins.

It is also a fairly chaotic conceit, ideologically muddy, structurally ragged, furiously unselective. Some of its humor, especially that between the archly feuding Devil and Angel, is merely coy. Some of its epigrams are still in the wistful stage, trying for urbanity and achieving only a juvenile cockiness. The over-all tone is uneven and perhaps still unformed: there are awkward shifts between revue-sketch humor and the elegance of good manners comedy. And a couple of the visions which take up the entire second half of the evening—notably the eighteenth century vignette and the Chekhovian idyll—are uncorked to disappointing silence, flat when they should be sizzling over.

How much you are going to like this particular gala will probably depend on your willingness to accept flashes of incidental felicity in lieu of sustained narrative and sharply-honed point. This reviewer found himself tiring of its increasingly frantic burlesques a good while before the final curtain came down, but it would be unfair to suggest that the evening does not have its rewards.

There are, for instance, adroit performances from Rex Harrison and Lilli Palmer as Devil and Sleeping Beauty. Mr. Harrison has a good bit of fun with his impersonations of a battered jailbird, a gouty Parisian cuckold, and a tongue-twisting Elizabethan fool. His more casual moments are perhaps unduly mannered—there is a heavy dose of artifice in his lolling all over a conference table—but in the evening's later moments he pops his head through a theater curtain with rakish cajolery and brightens many a faltering line.

* * *

Miss Palmer is a vision—let's say three or four visions—as Beauty herself, as a redheaded tart in a downtown saloon, as a Russian blonde mooning over her croquet mallet. As she changes costumes and styles for each of her prospective lovers, she has a tendency to bear down hard on the physical mannerisms and to neglect the verbal shadings, but the performance is a vivacious and varied one nonetheless. And Leueen McGrath makes a charmingly cheerful Angel.

The juiciest performance, though, is that which Robert Coote is giving as Colonel Desmond Rinder-Sparrow, the Englishman who cannot help yearning for his dogs in the midst of temptation. Mr. Coote is a thorough joy, in his embarrassment at being caught out writing poetry, in his petulant anger with an impertinent Devil, and in his reworking of a blank-verse drama to suit his own tweedy temperament.

"The Love of Four Colonels" is a rich diet, short on nourishment but handsomely served up.

"Be Your Age"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

January 15, 1953

'Be Your Age'

By WALTER F. KERR

THE proceedings aren't long under way at the 48th St. when one of the characters pauses, ponders a bit, and then announces "At the moment I can't think of an adequate comeback." This would seem to be the principal trouble with "Be Your Age."

Authors Mary Orr and Reginald Denham have dredged up a perfectly passable farce idea, as farce ideas go nowadays. A small-town widower gets news that his daughter is on the way home from college with a surprise fiance. Said fiance turns out not only to be a man of mellow years but an old school crony of papa's. He is, further, a fellow with a fairly sporting reputation, known for his addiction to nude swimming parties, and the flabbergasted parent's efforts to envision this silver-haired Lothario as a prospective son-in-law give promise of considerable, if conventional, fun.

• • •

Except when Loring Smith is snorting about the stage as a stunned father, the fun rarely comes off. In fact, Mr. and Mrs. Denham seem hardly to be trying. Again and again they build a series of feed lines toward an expected climactic gag, shy away from the gag line as though terrified that they will never be able to think of one that is funny enough, and slip evasively over into arch sentiment or some nervously out-of-place nonsense about labor unions.

When a really hopeful situation is dumped into their laps—as when papa decides to be fatherly with a man his own age—they seem to have just enough energy to establish the idea, neither the heart nor the wit to embellish it.

• • •

And when they do decide that a real joke is urgently demanded, they are inclined to settle for the sort of repartee in which the heroine, jilting the boy next door for her elderly swain, shouts, "Don't do anything desperate. I'd die if you threw yourself under a bus!" —and the boy shouts back. "So would I!"

A good third of this lazy playmaking is made far more palatable than it has any right to be by the apoplectic furies of Loring Smith. Mr. Smith, as any one who saw him in "John Loves Mary," will remember, is a majestic farceur who is able to look like an outraged sea lion at one moment, and like a humiliated camel the next. He rears back his head in towering rage, floats frigidly across the stage at an approximate elevation of three feet above everybody else, enunciates anathemas with splenetic magnificence and then lets his lower lip droop in unbearable pain. He turns a couple of stock scenes with his dimbrained secretary—one in which he dictates a letter which is going to be thoroughly misspelled, and another in which he preens himself as he gets ready to make a pass at her—into first-rate fooling. Given an exchange like:

"You're not a broken-down engine."

"Well, I'm doing a lot of puffing." Mr. Smith can gnaw at his lip and grimace just coyly enough to make you forget that the authors have been decidedly careless.

• • •

The rest of a generally competent and good-looking company have a tougher time of it. Conrad Nagel, as the ageing bridegroom, hasn't much to do but exude professional charm, dally at some all too gentlemanly lovemaking, and try to keep his college professor from seeming as smug as the script persists in making him.

"BE YOUR AGE"

Comedy by Mary Orr and Reginald Denham; staged by Mr. Denham; setting by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Jocelyn; presented by Alexander H. Cohen and Joseph Kipness in association with Morris K. Bauer at the 48th Street Theatre, January 14, 1953. The cast:

Lois Holly.....Lee Remick
Grace Rendel....Nancy Cushman
Bob Foley.....Dean Harens
Potter Erickson.....Bill Story
Archibald K. Holly..Loring Smith
Gwendolyn Holly....Hildy Parks
Eliot Spurgeon....Conrad Nagel
Abigail.....Patricia Ripley
Beatrix Bond....Martha Randall
Vicki Holly.....Ann Hillary
Binky Butterworth..Tom Tempest

Dean Harens is stuck with one of those aw-shucks boys on the neighborhood block, and he has real work cut out for him in trying to get through a romantic episode in which he must use a psychiatry textbook as guide. Hildy Parks is hard-working and attractive as the girl in the case.

Ralph Alswang's sunshiny blue-and-white living room is a gem of a setting, and it ought to be stored away and saved for a play as bright as it is.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 15, 1953

A Smith Packs Load In 'Be Your Age'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

There are a good many moments when you think "Be Your Age" is going to get some traction and start rolling. Nearly all those moments are when the comedy's action is directly concerned with Loring Smith.

If good will and valiant effort could do it Mr. Smith would make the show a delight, with his canny sense of farce and his consistent willingness to try for laughs when they just don't exist.

The rest of the company tries, too, less successfully, but the play thrashes around like a bucking sprinkler with too much water power being forced through it.

Vulnerable Father.

The basic idea sounds good enough for a rip-roaring evening. It concerns Mr. Smith's apoplectic objections to the marriage of his daughter to a man older than he is. The indignant father finds himself equally vulnerable when his widowhood is tempted by a smiling blond secretary, barely older than his daughter.

There are many other complications, including a more suitable suitor for the daughter, and romances of her two sisters. But the central situation is never believable enough to be urgent. The play has to depend for humorous momentum on bits and pieces of action, instead of any real overall purpose.

A comparable situation was once handled with great charm and wit in "Accent on Youth." But the farcical manner of this play makes it oddly unpalatable. The father's recollection that his likely son-in-law used to take girls swimming in the nude while they were in college, and was generally known as a Casanova, is more alarming than funny. Equally unsettling is the idea that the father's objection to the marriage is not so much the disparate ages as his old friend's philandering. Somehow this is the stuff of melodrama, not farce.

One-Man Show.

In the long run it is only Loring Smith, by his sheer force of style, who makes the situations so superficially amusing that they have no implications beyond laughter.

Conrad Nagel is cast as the older suitor, and he plays it gracefully and quite straight until the end of the play when he is caught up in horseplay. I got the impression that he was slightly embarrassed most of the time, but that mood suits his role.

Hildy Parks is pleasant enough as the young heroine who finds that the reasonable love of middle age is small competition for the passion of youth. Dean Harens plays the boy who is bound to get her, with the amiable grin and drawl of a Western hero. Nancy Cushman makes an agreeable aunt of the girls and Lee Remick is alternately wide eyed and saucy as a slangy sister. Martha Randall has some nice moments as the secretary and Bill Story acts his heart out trying to make something of a hackneyed butch neighbor.

Ralph Alswang has set the play in a bright, crisp room that perks up the mood of the evening most appropriately.

Journal American

January 15, 1953

Why It Opened Is One Big Mystery

By JOHN McCLAIN

A LOT of good auspices and some competent acting and writing talent congregated on the stage of the Forty-Eighth Street Theatre last night to produce one of the dreariest efforts of the season. It is called "Be Your Age" —and you shouldn't live that long.

This little item is from the pens of Mary Orr and Reginald Denham, she the author of the original story from which "All About Eve" was fashioned, he the director of "Dial M for Murder"; the cast includes Conrad Nagel, Loring Smith and Hildy Parks.

It seems absolutely incredible that at some pre-Broadway period they didn't all get together and say, "Let's call the whole thing off."

Oh, Hum

The Orr-Denham script deals with a young lady (Hildy Parks) who falls in love with Conrad Nagel, a classmate of her father (Loring Smith). This is a questionable idea for a blackout in the next George White's Scandals, when and if, but it is certainly inadequate as the thesis for three acts and five scenes, as presently presented.

Miss Parks comes onstage and announces that she is desperately in love with Nagel, and a few minutes later a young man her own age named Dean Harens enters by the same door and says he has always been in love with Miss Parks and is not going to give her up to this old fossil.

It is a monument to something, not ingenuity, that they can keep the young people apart for the ensuing two hours. There is never the slightest doubt that they will fall into each others arms, finally, and what transpires in the interim is neither fanciful nor funny.

Big Nod

Among the operatives, I would give the big nod to Loring Smith, who strives manfully with the part of the father. Hildy Parks is a decorative and reasonably engaging actress, and Harens, the lad, squints his eyes and proceeds ingenuously toward the fate which comes as a surprise to exactly nobody.

Conrad Nagel is a game competitor, but his assignment is hopeless. It would have made more sense, in an oblique way, if Loring Smith had been cast in Nagel's part. There is never a clue to why the young girl should have become so hopelessly enamored in the first place.

Lee Remick, Nancy Cushman and Bill Story lend enthusiastic support to the principal players, and Ralph Alswang has devised a suitable set. But "Be Your Age" remains about as unimaginative as its title.

New York Post

January 15, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Comedy Known as 'Be Your Age'

The play of the season least likely to surprise anybody by the way it turns out is "Be Your Age," a comedy by Mary Orr and Reginald Denham, which opened at the 48th St. Theater last night. It is about how a schoolgirl falls in love with a middle-aged lecturer and jilts her youthful fiance, much to her father's disgust, and all I can say is that anyone innocent enough to be astonished at the end, when she finally spurns the ancient fellow to return to the dashing juvenile, must be the sort of guileless playgoer at whom the authors were aiming.

Lest spectators in the fairly advanced age groups, who have been encouraged by the theater of Ezio Pinza and "South Pacific" to think of themselves as still romantically available, be disheartened by the depressing victory of male youth in the new comedy, I would like to cheer them immediately. The aging lecturer, as played by Conrad Nagel in immaculately smug fashion, is such a ponderously stuffy fellow that it isn't his declared 49 years that vanquish him. He would have been an unbearable suitor at any age in Mr. Nagel's impersonation.

Possible Shift

In truth, I suspect that just one shift in the casting might have made the later generation a considerably more likely contender against the callow but victorious young rival. Loring Smith, who plays the disapproving father, may not be an exactly romantic fellow, being fat, blubbery and explosive, but he gives so much more warmth and likeableness to his playing than the slender and carefully preserved Mr. Nagel that I think there might have been at least a slightly more even battle if Mr. Smith had been the professor and Mr. Nagel the father.

I doubt, however, if anything in the way of casting could have saved "Be Your Age." It isn't merely that Miss Orr and Mr. Denham have written a play in which the issue is never in question and age never has the remotest chance for victory. It is that they have provided a comedy that is bathed in cliches of thought, action and writing. There isn't a note of freshness or imagination in it, and it rarely fails to be completely obvious and mechanical. The authors have little to say and they say it at remarkable length.

Thanks to Mr. Smith's explosive comedy, there are a few amusing moments, but even they have nothing to do with the central situation. They constitute a sort of vaudeville act set down in the middle of the play, but without much bearing on it. There is something about a strike in the father's factory, which I never did understand, and there is an episode between the father and his amorous stenographer that Mr. Smith and Martha Randall, who plays the stenographer, make rather funny. Then the vaudeville stops and the play goes remorselessly on.

Having paid my respects to the aging generation in the cast, I can turn dutifully to the representatives of youth. It seemed to me that Dean Harens, as the jilted but conquering juvenile, worked somewhat insistently at his charm, but Hildy Parks, a lively and engaging young actress, did as much as possible with the role of the girl who thinks Mr. Nagel is romantic, and Lee Remick brought an attractively fresh directness to the part of the heroine's younger sister. But "Be Your Age" is a setback for both generations.

The New York Times

January 15, 1953

'Be Your Age,' by Mary Orr and Reginald Denham, Includes Conrad Nagel as a Romantic Scholar

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Although the Broadway theatre has taken a midwinter break, it is no better. It is worse. For "Be Your Age," which was batted back and forth at the Forty-eighth Street last evening, is one of the most trying experiences of the season.

Mary Orr and Reginald Denham, who acknowledge the authorship, probably hoped that they had written what is known as "an audience play." That means that critics are expected to look down on it while the public comes happily flocking in at the door.

* * *

But plays designed for theatregoers of mediocre taste are likely to please no one at all—theatregoers seldom being as stupid as theatre people hope they are. "Be Your Age" is a case in point. It is a popular comedy about a girl who engages herself to one of her father's college classmates. Add the further fact that the fiancé is an author of college textbooks on female psychology and you have the materials for a notably hackneyed evening.

Having begun with a plot taken out of yesteryear's stock, Mr. and Mrs. Denham (for the authors are fully married) have kept to the correct unities by writing in an outmoded style. And Mr. Denham, who recently distinguished himself by directing "Dial M for Murder," has managed to direct "Be Your Age" disastrously. His actors are unable to make any impression in the noisy steeplechase he has entered them in.

The cast includes Conrad Nagel, as the expert on female psychology; Loring Smith, as a father who alternates between shouts and double-takes; Hildy Parks, as the troublesome young lady; Dean Harens, as a juvenile swain; Nancy Cushman, as a sisterly housekeeper and some others. What they are able to do in the circumstances is pretty lamentable.

When the whole enterprise is bogged down in dullness in the middle of the evening, Martha Randall has a few comic moments as an illiterate stenographer struggling with the boss' dictation. This bit might not be noticed in a competent comedy. But it seems like a masterpiece of satire, wit, buffoonery, character analysis and histrionic technique in the dreary context of "Be Your Age."

A theatregoer can be grateful for some very small pleasures when professional writers afflict the theatre with "an audience play."

Daily Mirror

January 15, 1953

'Be Your Age' Opens at The 48th Street Theatre

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Alexander H. Cohen and Joseph Kipness brought an amiable, old-fashioned farce, called "Be Your Age" to the Forty-Eighth Street Theatre last evening. Mary Orr and Reginald Denham penned it. It is amazing that these gifted people should have given us such an unsatisfactory script.

* * *

THE NEW ARRIVAL has to do with a girl who jilts the nice young swain next door in favor of a sophisticated, middle-aged psychologist and lecturer. Her father is stunned to discover that his future son-in-law had been a college mate at Ohio State. Incidentally, Ohio State must have an effective public relations department, since it also is the background for a really good comedy, "The Male Animal."

Anyway, youth finally calls to youth. The girl dismisses her elderly suitor in time to prevent her childhood sweetheart from exiling himself on an engineering job in Brazil. As for papa, he falls temporarily for a flighty secretary half his years, but realizes in time the incongruity of the alliance.

Denham has staged the farce in robust style to cover its weaknesses. He has a capable cast with which to work. Loring Smith, one of our favorite character actors, fairly knocks himself out as the harassed father. He wrings laughs from material that would confound a less skillful farceur. He's a wonderful player to have on your team.

* * *

HILDY PARKS is most attractive as the girl who eventually finds youth preferable to erudition. Conrad Nagel is suave as the psychologist, and Dean Harens ingratiating as his successful rival. Lee Remick, Nancy Cushman, Bill Story and Marth Randall do well by other assignments.

Ralph Alswang has designed a pleasing set, and Jocelyn smart costumes, particularly those for the femme contingent.

"Be Your Age" is programed as a comedy, but it really is a farce. The difference, in our opinion, is that a comedy is believable and a farce is not. Credibility seems to be a necessary asset for success in the theatre today.

* * *

YOU HAVE to believe in characters to relish what they do. You have to laugh with them, not at them. Authors must present a theme with intelligence and artistry, rather than with haphazard tricks and buffoonery. Otherwise, the point fails to be effective in our highly discriminating present-day theatre.

Many of the first-nighters around us laughed uproariously. They found humor where we did not. "Be Your Age" impressed us as a primitive, ineffectual chuckle-provoker. It showed its age, alas.

W.W. says: "It will close Sat."

DAILY NEWS

January 15, 1953

'Be Your Age' Shows Its Age; an Old-Style Comedy, Elderly Jokes

By JOHN CHAPMAN

I've been sitting here in the office, just looking at my trusty old typewriter and asking it to think up a word which describes "Be Your Age," a comedy by Mary Orr and Reginald Denham which opened last evening at the 48th St. Theatre. The old mill never fails; if I stare at it long enough it comes up with something. This time it comes up with the adjective, "unremarkable."

"Be Your Age" is, indeed, an almost perfectly unremarkable play. It isn't bad, nor is it good, and it should be a great success in the Samuel French catalogue of plays for non-professional groups. It even succeeded, last evening, in making several professional actors, including Conrad Nagel, look like the cream of the talent in Wappingers Falls.

Smith a Funny Man.

The only one who manages to bull his way through "Be Your Age" and retain my respect as a farceur is Loring Smith, who is a great man when it comes to mugging, pouting, strutting, leering and slow-taking. When Smith, a small-town tycoon, gets to romping with an illiterate blonde secretary, Martha Randall, the comedy is fun. For the rest of the time the comedy is routine.

It is about Hildy Parks, Smith's pretty, 21-year-old daughter, ditching Dean Harens, the Nice Boy Next Door, and getting engaged to Nagel, a 49-year-old psychology prof with a smooth line. Nagel is nice enough, naturally, but he is too old for such a dish. Obviously, the play ends with Mlle. Parks coming to her youthful senses and taking on Nice Boy again, much to Nagel's relief.

It ends to my relief, too.